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ABSTRACT

The literary field offers an especially rich array of examples of the insight phenomenon and demonstrates that insight experiences occur outside the problem-solving paradigm of cognitive science. Analysis shows that the seemingly unitary moment of insight is actually a microgenetic sequence (a rapid sequence of developmental change) deeply imbedded in a larger developmental sequence. For instance, the insight of Dorothy Richardson (who is credited with "inventing" the stream of consciousness writing style) can be divided into the two stages of (1) sudden realization and (2) simultaneous negation of the author and emergence of the world of the novel. Insight is best understood as a family of phenomena occurring in creative work, which includes problem finding, problem resolution, synthesis, discovering similarities, analogies, increase in certainty, recognizing error, the "mot juste," and so on. Each kind of insight has several facets: the organizational facet, which serves to reorganize thought; the developmental facet, which is the microgenetic sequence; and the modality facet, which may be unimodal or crossmodal. Insight is neither a momentary flash nor a mysterious essence. Rather, it is a modality of thought with its own microgenesis embedded in a macrogenetic context whose post-insight phase may herald the beginning of a whole new project whose content is still unknown. Insights can be viewed as many small windows through which the prolonged process of creative work may be viewed. (Forty-two references are included.) (SG)

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The Genesis and Microgenesis of Sudden Insight in the Creation of Literature[1]

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In the evolving systems approach to creative thinking (Wallace and Gruber, 1989), Gruber has argued that insight is a frequent, normally occurring phenomenon in creative work (Gruber, 1981a, 1981b, 1989). In his discussion of insight in science, Gruber (1981a) also argues that insight has a longer duration than is indicated by the subjectively experienced momentary flash.

In this essay, I examine insight in the creation of literature. Literary insight offers an especially rich array of the phenomenon, and demonstrates that insight experiences occur outside the problem solving paradigm of cognitive science.

First, I shall examine one literary insight in detail. This particular insight, important in modern literature, is one in which a radical transformation of both form and content made its first appearance. My first goal, in presenting the study of this single instance, is to show (a) that the seemingly unitary moment of insight is actually a microgenetic[2] sequence, and (b) that it, in turn, is deeply embedded in a larger developmental sequence.

A second goal in this essay is to broaden the idea of insight by considering it as a <u>family</u> of phenomena occurring

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in creative work. The family includes problem finding (Arlin, 1986; Csikszentmihalyi and Getzels, 1988; Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi, 1975), problem resolution, synthesis, discovering similarities, analogies, increase in certainty, recognizing error, the mot juste, and so on.

In considering insight phenomena in literature, I examine the creation of novels and poetry and discuss similarities and differences between insight and inspiration.

The Crucial Insight of Novelist Dorothy Richardson

Dorothy M. Richardson (1873-1957) wanted to depict immediate subjective experience in its often unorganized and unselected state. To communicate this disorder, she invented a new literary genre and form, the stream of consciousness.[3] But she also wanted to write a novel, as she said, of "feminine realism" (Wallace, 1989). She believed that novelists had not accurately depicted the inner life of a woman. Thus, her 13-volume autobiographical novel Pilgrimage[4] is a feminist statement as well as the pioneering work in the stream-of-consciousness genre in the English novel. Richardson, although she remains one of the least well-known of the important stream-of-consciousness writers, was the direct forerunner of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. Her importance in the history of the English novel has been widely acknowledged (Allen, 1976; Edel, 1972; Fromm, 1977; Hanscombe & Smyers, 1987; Hansford-Johnson, 1963; Humphrey, 1955; Rosenberg, 1973; Sinclair, 1918; Woolf, 1923).

Stream-of-consciousness describes both content and technique. The content depicted in the stream-of-consciousness novel is inner psychic existence and functioning, especially its inchoate and disconnected forms and qualities. It is in this sense that it differs from other psychological fiction. The work of Dorothy Richardson, Virgina Woolf, James Joyce, and William Faulkner includes the incoherent thoughts of their characters. All these authors tried to represent essentially private processes directly. The problem of making something public while retaining its private quality was resolved by technique, for example direct interior monologue and ellipsis. As a result of these techniques, readers found themselves in a different relationship with the author and with the characters. The author had stepped away. For the first time readers were given direct access to the characters.

In 1912, Richardson began the long 13-volume autobiograhical novel Pilgrimage. This, her life's work, is a novel about the development of a woman, Miriam Henderson, whose mind is the filter through which the whole novel flows. Though it is well concealed, Miriam is in large measure Dorothy Richardson (Fromm, 1977; Wallace, 1982). She is 17 when the novel begins, and 39 when it ends.

The Microgenesis of Richardson's Insight

Richardson, at 39, began her major life's work alone in a cottage in Cornwall. It was here that she had a great insight concerning the literary form her novel must take.

This insight was a turning point in her work and surely one of the great moments in the evolution of the modern novel. The possibility of such a moment depended on earlier struggles. Since insight may entail an abrupt reorganization of previous thinking (Gruber, 1981a), the matter that is "previous" is a necessary condition for the insight. This continuity deserves conscientious attention because the insight is a process just as surely attached to previous efforts as it is to those that follow because of it. The work that precedes an insight is usually extensive, built up over months and years. The knowledge, capacities, areas of doubt, and questions that are developed make the insight possible.

For several years, well before she began Pilgrimage, Richardson had thought of writing a novel. She was well read in Russian, French, and English literature, including the novels of Tolstoy, Flaubert, Balzac, Conrad, and Henry James. She was familiar with men's depiction of the psychology of women. Dostoyevsky, Conrad, and Henry James had all explored the inner minds of their characters, depicting nuances of mood, issues of identity and other subjective matters. But the basic position of these writers was that of an author telling a story. Although Richardson greatly admired some of these novelists (especially Conrad and James [Wallace, 1982]), they did not treat or accomplish what she had in mind. Henry James perhaps came the closest. In James' The Ambassadors (which Miriam Henderson was to

discover in Pilgrimage), the authorial "point of view" was of intense interest to her: the idea that, once inside a given mind, the reader can have only the point of view of that particular mind.

Richardson found herself in Cornwall in almost total solitude. She had borrowed a cottage belonging to friends and saw no one except a cleaning woman who came once a week and also brought provisions. Interestingly, this situation is almost identical to the one Katherine Anne Porter (1982) arranged for herself in Connecticut when she was embarked on the lengthy task of writing her massive novel Ship of Fools.

Richardson had written copiously, a "mass of material," making and rejecting repeated attempts over a period of about four years, from 1908 to 1912, to write in traditional narrative forms. By her own account, she was not consciously searching for a new form. Her struggles were with traditional narrative, which did not work to her satisfaction:

> When I first began writing Pilgrimage I intended no kind of fresh departure in method. Then in Cornwall, in solitude, when the world fell completely away, and when focusing intensely, I suddenly realized that I couldn't go on in the usual way, telling about Miriam, describing her. There she was as I first saw her, going upstairs. But who was there to describe her? It came to me suddenly. It was an extraordinary moment when I realized what could and what could not be done. Then it became more and more thrilling as I saw what was there. (Morgan, 1931)

This passage from an interview describes her insight. Note that the insight occurred while Richardson was "focusing intensely" on her task. In this it differs from

other well-known descriptions of insights. Archimedes' famous insight occurred while he was having a bath, Poincaré's when he was stepping onto a bus, Kekulé's during a reverie, and Darwin's while reading "for amusement" (see Gruber, 1981a, for an analysis and discussion of these "Aha" experiences). Furthermore, one part of Richardson's insight was finding a question: "Who was there to describe her?" Her insight was to find the problem and not, as in the cases above, the solution. In effect, she invented a problem that had not existed before. The way to the solution, as she indicated, was implied in her discovery of the problem.

In his Productive Thinking, Wertheimer (1945) was one of the first to emphasize the importance of problem finding:

> Often in great discovery the most important thing is that a certain question is found. Envisaging, putting the productive question is often more important, often a greater achievement than solution of a set question. (p.123)

Richardson's insight was a two-stage phenomenon. First she "suddenly realized" that she could not use the traditional form, in which an author tells a story "about" a character. She saw that it was not inexperience or lack of skill but the literary form that had prevented her from expressing what she wanted to express. Her visual image of Miriam going upstairs led to the second stage of the insight: the first sentence of Pilgrimage begins "Miriam left the gaslit hall and went slowly upstairs;" "Who was

there to describe her?" put the problem squarely as one of form concerning the position of the author. Richardson did not wish to be an author telling a story. As the insight developed, the new question quickly became the new imperative: to do away with the author. Once she had grasped this negation, the positive could emerge and the world of her novel--that is, its content--opened out to her: "Then it became more and more thrilling as I saw what was there." What was there was the whole panoply of Miriam's experience, now to be directly expressed to the reader. In this way, the first, global stage of the insight was differentiated and developed. Thus, in Richardson's case, a closer examination of the "moment" of insight reveals it to be a more prolonged and intricate affair than the familiar sudden flash would lead us to believe.

Insight as a Family of Phenomena in Literature

There is no doubt that various kinds of insight--problem finding, problem solution, seminal image, Wertheimer's envisaging, germinal idea, and burning question--occur in literary work. Rather than continuing the argument about the importance of insight, it is time to strive for greater conceptual clarity about its nature. The first step is to identify the major types of phenomena that might be called "insight".

Richardson's insight, like others in both science and literature, bears at once on a question of method and form, and on a question of imagistic content. She was facing the

puzzle of knowing what she wanted to write but not being able to use traditional methods.

Her insight included a visual (and possibly kinesthetic) image seminal to her novel. In that sense, as I discuss below, it was like those found among other novelists. The modality of insight may be visual, kinetic, verbal, aural, etc., and an insight may display a multimodal pattern. What the modality patterns of insight are within individuals, disciplines, or broader areas such as art and science remains to be investigated.

Richardson's insight reorganized her previous thinking. As we shall see, insight can also serve to organize thought.

Insight and the Novel

Novelists often describe a grain, a seed, or an image from which a whole novel evolves. Anne Tyler described it like this:

> while I was painting the downstairs hall I thought of a novel to write. Really I just thought of a character; he more or less wandered into my mind, wearing a beard and a broad brimmed leather hat. I figured that if I sat down and organized this character on paper, a novel would grow up around him (Tyler, 1980, p.3).

Joan Didion experiences pictures that "shimmer around the edges." She explained that her novel Play It As It Lays began with two pictures. This is what she said about one of them:

> This second picture was of something actually witnessed. A young woman walks through the casino at the Riviera in Las Vegas at one in the morning. She crosses the casino alone and picks up a house telephone. I watch her because I have heard her paged, and recognize her name: she is a minor actress I see around Los Angeles from time to time...but have never

> met. I know nothing about her. Who is paging her? Why is she here to be paged? How exactly did she come to this? It was precisely this moment in Las Vegas that made Play It as It Lays begin to tell itself to me. (Didion, 1980 pp.21-22)

From an earlier era, Katherine Anne Porter also reports the growth of a story from a single observed image or event. In the case of this author, the whole story is developed before it is actually written down.

> It just takes a little--a tiny seed. Then it takes root, and it grows. It's an organic thing. That story had been on my mind for years, growing out of this one little thing that happened in Mexico. It was forming and forming in my mind, until one night...I knew the time had come to write that story, and I had to write it (Porter, 1982, p.153).

Henry James' novels and stories always began with the "vital particle" mentioned above, or a "grain of gold." It always came from the outside world, and was always instantly recognized by James. In the case of The Spoils of Poynton it was "a mere floating particle in the stream of talk" at a dinner party.

> What above all comes back to me with this reminiscence is the sense of the inveterate minuteness...of the precious particle, reduced, that is, to its mere fruitful essence. Such is the interesting truth about the stray suggestion, the wandering word, the vague echo, at the touch of which the novelist's imagination winces as at the prick of some sharp point. (James, 1908/1952, p.147).

James suggests that the writer is especially sensitive to recognizing the faint stimulus, the seed from which the work will grow.

These experiences are all insights. In the case of Didion, they include a problem which the writer knows she will solve in creating the work. They have the same subjective quality of "being given," of coming to the

person. In many cases they serve to organize material, sometimes even to unfold a whole work. James (1908/1952) emphasized the readiness and preparedness of the writer to "receive" and make use of the phenomena.

The novelist, like the poet (see below), is prepared to feel the prick of recognition. James' antennae were always at the alert. This metaphor emphasizes the active, searching stance that precedes insight. Poets, on the other hand, tend to convey metaphors emphasizing the passive, receptive side of the creative process: "the empty womb of poetry for ever in the poet's consciousness, waiting for the fertilizing seed" (Spender, 1946/1952, p.124). While novelists as well as poets describe themselves as being in a state of expectation, poets turn especially often to the idea that inspiration fuels their work.

Poetic Inspiration and Insight

Since Plato, the creation of poetry has been tied to inspiration (Abrams, 1958; Murray, 1989). At its extreme, poetic inspiration seems to put the writer in a passive stance of being "given" the work without a feeling of conscious effort. Milton, Dryden, and Goethe all described experiences of this kind and believed that the unconscious was the source of their creative imagination. (This idea, of course, is not exclusive to writers but is alive and well among scientists as well as artistsd. It has been an important feature of some theories of creativity, for

example Wallas [1926], and especially of psychoanalytically oriented theorists [see Rothenberg, 1979]).

There are clear differences between the two concepts insight and inspiration. "Insight" involves understanding, seeing into something. It is a process that goes on inside an individual mind, accompanied often by a shock of recognition. According to Lonergan (1978), insight is active--an act of understanding. "Inspiration" (from the Latin root to inhale) by contrast, is the "breathing in" of something outside the person, for example, the breath of the Muses or Gods, and does not entail understanding. Often, the inspiration takes the one inspired by surprise.

On the other hand, there is considerable overlap between insight and inspiration: both occur rapidly and come apparently unbidden; both entail taking cognizance of something, becoming aware of something; both are accompanied by excitement or exultation. Both are responsive to current, developing concerns of an individual mind.

Abrams (1958) describes inspiration not only as the oldest, but as the most widespread and persistent account of poetic invention (p.189). He also notes its sudden, effortless and unanticipated onset, its involuntary nature, and the accompanying feelings of elation or rapture--all qualities that describe insight equally well. Harding (1948) does not discriminate between the two concepts; to her, inspiration and insight are interchangeable.

A well-known example of poetic inspiration is Coleridge's account, published in 1816, of how the poem Kubla Khan came to him in a dream, twenty years earlier, in the summer of 1797 (Richards, 1967). In fact the full title of the poem is Kubla Khan or a Vision in a Dream. Upon waking, he began to write it down, but was interrupted and when he resumed his writing, most of the poem had vanished from memory.

Perkins (1981) notes that this version of the creation of Kubla Khan was disputed by Lowes (1927) who argued tellingly that the poem did not come to Coleridge out of the blue, but was drawn from his extensive reading. Lowes points to images and phrases in the poem that can be traced to these sources. A later study of the origins of the Kubla Khan by Schneider (1953) also challenged Coleridge's account. Schneider quotes from another version of the poem, written in Coleridge's hand, discovered in 1934. In this version, Coleridge described the poem as "This fragment with a good deal more, not recoverable, composed in a sort of Reverie brought on by two grains of Opium, taken to check a dysentary...in the fall of the year 1797" (Perkins, 1981, p.14). This version is now considered to be the authentic one according to Coleridge's most recent biographer, Richard Holmes (1989). By connecting Kubla Khan with other Coleridge poems of the time, Holmes, like Lowes (1927), sets the poem into another, broader context of Coleridge's thinking.

Thus, Lowes, Schneider, and Holmes present persuasive evidence indicating (a) that the poem came to Coleridge while he was in a reverie and did not make a magic appearance while he was unconscious; and (b) that it was connected to, rather than unhinged from, previous work and thought.

There are other examples of writers, and especially poets, reporting experiences in which magical and apparently involuntary processes are highlighted, and volitional ones minimized. A.E. Housman's well-known account of poetic inspiration is an example. Like Coleridge's post-narcotic reverie, Housman's experiences of inspiration, would come to him after the sedating effects of beer and lunch:

> Having drunk a pint of beer at luncheon...I would go out for a walk of two or three hours. As I went along, ...there would flow into my mind, with sudden and unaccountable emotion, sometimes a line or two of verse, sometimes a whole stanza at once, accompanied... by a vague notion of the poem which they were destined to form part of. Then there would usually be a lull of an hour or so, then perhaps the spring would bubble up again...When I got home I wrote them down, leaving gaps, and hoping that further inspiration might be forthcoming another day....I happen to remember distinctly the genesis of the piece which stands last in my first volume. Two of the stanzas, came into my head, just as they are printed, while I was crossing the corner of Hampstead Heath between Spaniard's Inn and the footpath to Temple Fortune. A third stanza came with a little coaxing after tea. One more was needed, but it did not come: I had to turn to and compose it myself, and that was a laborious business. I wrote it thirteen times, and it was more than a twelvemonth before I got it right. (Housman, 1952, p.91)

Housman himself refers to the first stage in the production of poetry as "less an active than a passive and involuntary process" (p.91). He believed this to be true not

just for his own way of composing but for many poets; and indeed other poets confirm such a notion (Lowell, 1952; Spender, 1946/1952).

Yet in Housman's account it is clear that, while some verses came to him, others had to be struggled for. Housman also presents himself (as do other poets), as though these unbidden lines are isolated fragments. But notice in the story the intimations of Housman's awareness of a larger work, the "vague notion of the poem," within which the lines would be fitted. He leaves gaps for parts still to come. Gaps imply the structure that makes them possible. The account opens the possibility that at the point of inspiration some sketch of the larger whole had already been constructed onto which the new material is being mapped and which the new material helps to organize.

Like the experience of insight, poetic inspiration finds fertile ground in the prepared mind of the always expectant poet. Paul Valéry (1889) believed that poetic merit lay not so much in receiving inspiration but in seizing and examining it. Rather than <u>re</u>organizing thought, poetic inspiration includes the insights that <u>organize</u> the work.

<u>Conclusions</u>

Insight and inspiration are not arbitrary. Each is embedded in some larger, purposive structure. Each includes active elements. Writers' statements describing insight

experiences can be probed to clarify and extend our understanding of these points.

The concept of insight is multiplicitous in several senses. As already mentioned, there are different kinds of insights. But any single insight also has different facets.

First, it has an organizational facet. The insight serves to reorganize thought, for example, by integrating previously unrelated elements into a new harmonious whole. Or, insight serves to organize thought by providing a seminal image or idea from which the work takes shape.

Second, insight has a developmental facet. While insight may be experienced as a sudden flash, it is actually an intricate, microgenetic developmental process.

Third, there is a modality facet. An insight may be unimodal or crossmodal. This raises numerous questions, as yet unanswered. Is the modality related to the field or medium in which the creative work is situated? Or to the individual personality of the creative person? Why are some insights unimodal and some multimodal? Does a multimodal insight facilitate or accelerate organization or reorganization?

The insight experience is set off in different ways. It may be evoked by an external observation, such as Didion's observation of the woman walking through the casino in Las Vegas, or Katherine Anne Porter's observation of a scene in Mexico. Or another external source, a remark made by someone at a dinner party, such as electrified Henry James, may

prompt the insight. It may be an experience which "comes" to the person, for example, as it did to Housman. A fourth type of precipitating event occurs inside the mind of the person, where the work itself leads to the insight. It is this kind of insight that Richardson described, as did Kekulé and Poincaré (Gruber 1981a). These four classes of insight can be ordered according to the state of mind of the person providing these descriptions, leading to the array presented in Table 1.

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Although there are empty categories, further search will probably fill some of them. Not represented in Table 1 is the state of readiness described by so many writers. Even for those writers or poets who describe a passive organism, such as Housman (or Shelley, who was an extreme instance), there is likely to be an explicit or implicit state of expectation. When Housman embarked on his walks after lunch he was surely in a state of readiness to "receive" the poetry.

Insight is not a momentary flash, nor a mysterious essence. Rather, it is a modality of thought with its own microgenesis, embedded, in turn, in a macrogenetic context whose post-insight phase may not simply consist of verification (a concept tethered to scientific discovery), but may herald the beginning of a whole new project whose content is still unknown.

Whether it touches the mind of an actively searching or passively expectant creator may be less important than that it must be seized in order to reorganize or organize thought. Thus, we can look at insights as many small windows affording us glimpses of the prolonged process of creative work.

TABLE 1

Phenomenology of Insight Experience in Literature

	Phenomenological States			
Precipitating Condition	Awake, Focusing Directly on Task	Awake, Not Focusing Directly on Task	Reverie (Hypnogogic)	Asleep
1. Observing external event		Didion		--
2. Conversation or dialogue		H. James		--
3. "It came to me."		Housman	Coleridge	
4. Work itself	Richardson			

Notes

1. I want to thank Howard E. Gruber and Margery B. Franklin for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

2. The term "microgenetic," is used to mean a rapid sequence of developmental change (Catan, 1986; Werner, 1957).

3. In France, Edouard Dujardin was the first to use the genre, in his book Les lauriers sont coupés (1887), translated as We'll to the woods no more (1938). Other novelists had depicted inner psychological processes, for example, Tolstoy, Henry James, and Proust. But Tolstoy only used interior monologue once or twice in his novels and neither Henry James nor Proust ever depicted inchoate psychic processes directly. Indeed, James' treatment was exceedingly rational. Lawrence Sterne, more than one hundred years earlier, in Tristram Shandy, used association of ideas in Tristram's autobiographical narrative so lavishly that he doesn't actually get born until page 80. But all these authors had the stance of standing back and telling a story. The stream-of-consciousness novelists were rebelling against this tradition.

4. Richardson, D. M. Pilgrimage. In England, the novel was first published in 11 single volumes available between 1915

and 1935 by Duckworth. Collected editions are as follows:

1938, London: J.M. Dent & Sons and New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 12 books in a 4-volume omnibus edition;

1967, London: J.M. Dent & Sons and New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 13 books including the last, unfinished book March Moonlight, in a 4-volume edition;

1976, New York: Popular Library, 13 books in a 4-volume edition;

1979, London: Virago, 13 books in a 4-volume edition.

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